Magical realism has become well-known as a literary genre, but was a term used to categorize visual art as early as the 1920s. In both the visual and literary arts, it refers to a style of expression that presents a realistic world that has elements of the magical or fantastical.

History

The term "magical realism" was coined by European art historian Franz Roh in the 1920s. Roh believed that the form was a reaction to expressionism and a return to celebrating the autonomy of the objective world. In the 1950s, influenced by a 1949 essay on the topic by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, Latin American authors embraced the style and combined it with French surreal concepts as well as folklore. In American and British literature, magical realism has been a popular genre since the 1960s, and has been an important branch of postmodernism.

Characteristics

Magical realism is a literary genre that has sometimes frustrated critics who have been unable to define the style with any precision. However, certain traits are singled out as being typical of the genre. Magical realism, as the name would imply, is a story that is set in a mostly realistic setting, but with some magical elements. Often, magical realism features social or political commentary. Finally, the narrator, if there is one, takes a tone toward the fantastical elements that would indicate that she finds them completely normal.

Authors

Franz Kafka, German-born author of 'The Metamorphosis', is considered an influential early practitioner of the form, even though the term "magical realism" was not yet in use. Many of the most best known authors working in the style of magical realism are from Latin America. Nobel Laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez wrote the influential novel 'One Hundred Years of Solitude.'

American audiences may be familiar with 'Like Water for Chocolate', which became a popular independent film. The novel upon which the film is based was written by Latin American novelist Laura Esquivel.

Magical Realism vs. Surrealism

The surreal art movement preceded magical realism. Surrealism is an artistic philosophy that developed in the mid-20th century in response to the pioneering work of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Freud brought the concept of a subconscious mind into popular acceptance. The primary difference between the two forms is that surrealism is an artistic representation of the dreamlike and fantastical elements of the human mind. It’s not presented as being in any way connected with objective reality. Magical realism contains fantastical elements, but are elements that dot the landscape of reality, not the landscape itself.

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Read more: http://www.ehow.com/info_8732795_magical-realism-literature.html
Tips & Tricks for Writing Magical Realism

Using Magical Realism in Your Writing: focusing on what Magical Realism is and is not.

What can Magical Realism do for your fiction?

• Magical Realism can create a really unique mood and atmosphere.
• It can create a sense of wonder, magic, the bizarre, or a sense of the strange.
• It can be used to present ideas or story in a unique way.
• It can take metaphor and symbolism one step further.
• It can beef up the story’s climax.
• It can be used to convey theme.
• It can take an idea from the fantasy, supernatural, horror, or sci-fi genres and give it new life.
• It can be used to colour an entire piece or to just emphasize the magnitude of a single moment.
• It can give an author ability to explore the possibilities of imagination in a different way.

However, that doesn’t mean that Magical Realism should be included in any story or piece. If you are using Magical Realism, it needs to be purposeful. There should be reason and meaning behind it.

Magical Realism as a Genre, Technique, and Element.

Whether Magical Realism is a genre, a technique, or just an element of fiction depends on how you use it.

Genre
Magical Realism is a genre but not a genre by itself because it is not regulated to a specific story or setting. By its nature, it must always be used in conjunction with another genre such as romance or historical. When magic is blended with reality in a seamless way and is prevalent throughout the story, it could be seen as being a part of the genre.

Technique
You can also use the techniques of Magical Realism as in ‘A White Room’, as Audrey Niffenegger did in The Time Traveler’s Wife, or in the way M. Night Shyamalan did in ‘Signs’. These works used the technique of blending speculative fiction with reality to a point of blurring the lines, creating some great work, but keep in mind that they are not technically Magical Realistic works.

When Magical Realism technique is used in line with other conventions of Magical Realism then can be used to colour the entire work or create an element of Magical Realism in a piece.
An Element
If it's only used once in a very small way or if the conventions of another genre take precedent, then it could be seen as an element. For example in the film ‘The Piano’, there is only one single moment of Magical Realism when one character hears the voice of another character inside his head. This magic only happens once and in a very muted way, so *The Piano* is a Magical Realism film, is more of a historical story with a single Magical Realistic element.

What are the important factors to keep in mind when writing Magical Realism?

Genre Conventions Based on the Type of Magical Realism

There two branches of Magical Realism. The first type, is called **atmospheric Magical Realism**, is where small magical elements or details are sprinkled throughout the story, in which case the magical elements colour the story and atmosphere and may impact the characters and plot, but are not the main focus or even significant to the plot. With this type, characters usually do not acknowledge magic as out of the ordinary and there are generally no explanations.

For example in *The House of the Spirits* there is a character that has prophetic visions and sees ghosts but no one really seems to think this is abnormal, it's not presented as fantastical, and it’s not the main focus of the plot, just a character trait.

The second type, is called **catalyst Magical Realism**, where there is one major magical thing that serves as the catalyst for the story or for a story turning point or climax, such as turning invisible or a child turning into an adult overnight like the film ‘Big’, in which case the characters will react to this as abnormal, and it will effect the characters and plot in a significant way. Sometimes there are theories or suggested explanations but nothing substantial.

For example in *The Green Mile*, the characters respond to the miracles they experience as being abnormal. Yet, they still accept it without making a big thing about it. It’s still considered Magical Realism because in spite of this magical occurrence, the story continues to be grounded in reality.
Avoid Explaining Why Magic Happens
This is a common convention of atmospheric Magical Realism. Try to avoid explaining the magical elements. If there is too much explanation as to why the magic is happening, it changes its effect and may even take it out of the genre.

For example: ‘The Time Traveler’s Wife’ is a story about a man who pops back and forth throughout time without a scientific time machine. The story is set in our reality and appears to not be sci-fi because there’s no actual experiment or invention to cause his time travelling. Some might speculate that this is Magical Realism, but it is not because as the story progresses the characters learn his time travelling is a genetic anomaly akin to evolutionary mutation. This explanation makes it more sci-fi realism.

Emotional Explanations
The only type of reasoning that works without breaking the genre, probably because it’s not an explanation grounded in reality. For example, there’s a book The Theory of Invisibility by Aimee Pita. In it, a woman is haunted by the death of her husband and so she slips into a state of invisibility. Her emotions are what cause the magic.

To React or Not to React?
A common convention of the atmospheric Magical Realism is to have characters not react to the magical elements at all. For example, in Sarah Addison Allen’s works, a man leaves black dust on everything he touches. This was not seen as magical or even acknowledged as odd, but given as the reason why another character suspected his infidelity. In catalyst Magical Realism, characters react and their actions or choices are motivated or influenced by the experience.

Techniques for Incorporating Magical Realism into Your Fiction

Blend, Blend, Blend!
The key element that makes something Magical Realism instead of fantasy or horror is the blending. In fantasy, the magic is set apart from reality. In the ‘Harry Potter’ stories by J. K. Rowling, the world of magic is hidden, a world apart. In vampire flicks like ‘Twilight’, the world of vampires is hidden right under the noses of the mortal world. It is a world apart. In ghost stories, ghosts exist somewhere else, in another world, but invade the mortal realm. Fantasy takes the reader into another world, whereas Magical Realism alters the world we already exist in, making it new.

It’s all about presentation. You can have the exact same elements as in the stories mentioned above (vampires, ghosts, etc.) but if presented using Magical Realism, it changes the reader’s experience.
So how do you actually go about doing that?

**Use an Atmosphere of Possibility or Foreshadowing**
It’s critical to create an atmosphere of possibility and or use foreshadowing, so that the magical elements don’t seem out of place and pull the reader out of the story, which we never want unless writing meta-fiction.

**Atmosphere of Possibility**
Quick definitions: Atmosphere is also called mood, and it’s experienced in the reader but created via the author's tone (also called attitude) or approach to something. If an author approaches a setting like a woodland; and describes it as dark and oddly silent, the reader will experience an atmosphere of fear and expect something frightening to happen, but if the author approaches the woods as sunny and twittering with birds, the reader will feel happy and expect happy things to happen.

To successfully approach writing with an attitude of wonder, mystery, awe, strangeness, or magic, it is necessary to create corresponding atmospheres, which creates the expectation to the reader for something to happen that corresponds with the atmosphere. Atmosphere is critical for Magical Realism and is used in both atmospheric and catalyst types of genre.

**Foreshadowing Definition:**
The language used to hint in a subtle way that something will happen so the reader doesn't even realize there was a hint in the first place. Foreshadowing can be accomplished through atmosphere or through a brief mention of something.

In ‘The Piano’, the main character mentions something about her former lover having the ability to hear her voice even though she was a mute. It’s not clear if she means this literally or figuratively, and it’s so brief, later when another character hears her voice in his head despite her inability to speak it doesn’t seem so random and out of place because there was an earlier hint or foreshadowing.

**Add a Little Magic to Other Writing Techniques**
When writing fiction you use techniques for characterization, plot, setting, atmosphere, dialogue, description, etc. When writing in the genre of Magical Realism, approach your techniques knowing that you can take it into the realm of magic and incorporate the impossible into those areas.

**Characterization.**
Character traits, quirks, appearances, flaws, etc. such as a character who has long bony fingers. Instead of describing them as such, say, ‘whenever he touched a piece of porcelain his fingers transformed it into bone’. Another example, for setting could describe a house as creaking and old or you could have the story’s characters actually hear things like, ‘you’re too thin, you should eat more’, when they step on a loose floorboard’. Remember to blend by avoiding character reaction and explanation when it comes to small details like this.

**Metaphor, Simile, & Symbolism Can Come to Life**
Another way to work Magical Realism into fiction is to use a metaphor or symbol, but instead of it being a comparison, make it actually happen. For example: the death of a child might be symbolized by the appearance of dead jellyfish on a beach or it could be stated, without explanation, that the death caused it
to happen. Another example: One could say a cushion was as soft as a rose or that the cushion had been weaved out of living rose petals.

**No Restrictions**
Magical Realism is a tradition of thinking outside of the box. Don’t let your work be restricted by normal everyday conventions and realities that arise in your story. Be bold and let your imagination take wings. 

*Magic realism is: ‘making the ordinary extraordinary’.* Blend reality and magic so thoroughly that it isn’t even a question in the readers’ minds that it is a part of reality and in some cases can almost make the reader forget such things aren’t real.

*Potential pitfalls to avoid when writing Magical Realism.*

**Don’t Forget about the Reality**
Don’t let the use of magic lead to creating too much of an abnormal reality. Always write in reality in order for it to be realism, failing to evoke the magical elements, that doesn’t blend with reality, will turn the story into fantasy.

*Practical Magic*

**The Plot Doesn’t Have to Be About the Magic**

Don’t think that the plot needs to be about the magical elements. In ‘Practical Magic’ story is about how two sisters (who happen to be witches) who try to cover up an accidental murder of an abusive boyfriend. Magic characterizes the story, creates the atmosphere, is involved with characterization and plot, but it’s not what the story is about.

Even with catalyst Magical Realism, the magical element is not generally the focus of the plot but rather an element that causes a major turning point. With the movie ‘Big’, a boy is turned into an adult man overnight. *This is a magical catalyst for the rest of the story*, but the rest of the story isn’t about him trying to figure out why the magic happened. It’s about a child grappling with the very real issues of adulthood.

**When Using Magical Realism in Conjunction with Other Speculative Fiction**

You can take science fiction or fantasy themes and apply magical realism, but if you want your work to be seen as Magical Realism and not the other genre, you cannot let the conventions of the other speculative genre outweigh the Magical Realism. If so, your work will be seen as fantasy, sci-fi, or horror, etc.

**Don’t use Magical Realism as an Easy Out or a Gimmick**

You can’t just throw Magical Realism in a James Bond film and say it works because it’s Magical Realism. Don’t try to use Magical Realism as an easy device or fix when you can’t figure out what to do in a story. Always use it with purpose and intention.
Just because some stories play it straight and have only one actual moment of Magical Realism (The Piano, Magnolia, The Secret Garden) doesn’t mean the entire piece wasn’t hinting in that direction the entire time, so that the reader could accept it once it took place. Use foreshadowing, tone, atmosphere (like a sense of mystery or peculiarity), and genre to prepare your readers’ for the use of Magical Realism.

**Don’t try to use Magical Realism without reading others who do it well**
Read up! Watch films. Magical Realism is really something you have to feel out to get down and reading and yes watching the work you want to emulate is always a must in fiction.

“A novel of grit, independence, and determination ... an intelligent story well told.”

http://www.stephaniecarroll.net/2015/09/tips-tricks-for-writing-magical-realism.html
What Is Magical Realism, Really?
by Bruce Holland Rogers

"Magical realism" has become a debased term. When it first came into use to describe the work of certain Latin American writers, and then a small number of writers from many places in the world, it had a specific meaning that made it useful for critics. If someone made a list of recent magical realist works, there were certain characteristics that works on the list would share. The term also pointed to a particular array of techniques that writers could put to specialized use. Now the words have been applied so haphazardly that to call a work "magical realism" doesn't convey a very clear sense of what the work will be like.

If a magazine editor these days asks for contributions that are magical realism, what she's really saying is that she wants contemporary fantasy written to a high literary standard---fantasy that readers who "don't read escapist literature" will happily read. It's a marketing label and an attempt to carve out a part of the prestige readership for speculative works. I don't object to using labels to make readers more comfortable, to draw them to work that they might otherwise unfairly dismiss. But by over-using the term, we've obscured a distinctive branch of literature. More importantly from my perspective, we've made it harder for new writers to discover the tools of magical realism as a distinct set allowing them to create work that portrays particular ways of looking at the world. If writers read a hundred works labeled "magical realism," they will encounter such a hodgepodge that they may not recognize the minority of such works that are doing something different, something those writers may want to try themselves.

So what is magical realism?

It is, first of all, a branch of serious fiction, which is to say, it is not escapist. Let me be clear: I like escapist fiction, and some of what I write is escapism. I'm with C.S. Lewis when he observes that the only person who opposes escape is, by definition, a jailer. Entertainment, release, fun...these are all good reasons to read and to write. But serious fiction's task is not escape, but engagement. Serious fiction helps us to name our world and see our place in it. It conveys or explores truth.

Any genre of fiction can get at truths, of course. Some science fiction and fantasy do so, and are serious fiction. Some SF and fantasy are escapist. But magical realism is always serious, never escapist, because it is trying to convey the reality of one or several worldviews that actually exist, or have existed. Magical realism is a kind of realism, but one different from the realism that most of our culture now experiences.

Science fiction and fantasy are always speculative. They are always positing that some aspect of objective reality were different. What if vampires were real? What if we could travel faster than light?

Magical realism is not speculative and does not conduct thought experiments. Instead, it tells its stories from the perspective of people who live in our world and experience a different reality from the one we call objective. If there is a ghost in a story of magical realism, the ghost is not a fantasy element but a manifestation of the reality of people who believe in and have "real" experiences of ghosts. Magical realist fiction depicts the real world of people whose reality is different from ours. It's not a thought experiment. It's not speculation. Magical realism endeavors to show us the world through other eyes. When it works, as I think it does very well in, say, Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*, some readers will inhabit this other reality so thoroughly that the "unreal" elements of the story, such as witches, will seem frighteningly real long after the book is finished. A fantasy about southwestern Indian witches allows you to put down the book with perhaps a little shiver but reassurance that what you just read is made up. Magical realism leaves you with the understanding that this world of witches is one that people really live in and the *feeling* that maybe this view is correct.

It's possible to read magical realism as fantasy, just as it's possible to dismiss people who believe in witches as primitives or fools. But the literature at its best invites the reader to compassionately experience the world as many of our fellow human beings see it.

There are three main effects by which magical realism conveys this different world-view, and those effects relate to the ways in which this world-view is different from the "objective" (empirical, positivist) view. In these other realities, time is not linear, causality is subjective, and the magical and the ordinary are one and the same.

Consider the structure of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. As readers sense from the first first page which begins with a firing squad and then a very, very long flashback, time does not always march forward in
the magical realist world view. The distant past is present in every moment, and the future has already happened. Great shifts in the narrative's time sequence reflect a reality that is almost outside of time. This accounts for ghosts, for premonitions, and the feeling that time is a great repetition rather than a progression. In Garcia Marquez's novel, certain events keep returning in the present focus, even as time does gradually wind through generations.

As for causality, the objective view tells us that one person's emotion can't kill someone else. We believe this so strongly that a world view in which emotion can kill won't convince us—we'll write it off as fantasy. So magical realist works put causally connected events side by side in a way that doesn't appear to violate objective reality, but attempts to convince us by details that the events described are linked by more than chance. In Ceremony, for example, there is a scene in which a spurned woman is dancing very angrily. Miles away, the man who betrayed her is checking the commotion his cattle are making in the night. Descriptions of the woman's heels stamping the floor are alternated with descriptions of the cattle trampling the man to death, back and forth from one to the other. No assertion of causality is made, but the dancer's heels and the animals' hooves become linked so powerfully that the reader doesn't just "get it." What's conveyed is not a symbol or a metaphor, but the reality that a woman can be so angry that when she dances, her lover dies.

The third effect is my favorite. If your view of the world includes miracles and angels, beast-men and women of unearthly beauty, gods walking among us and ceremonies that can end a drought, then all of these things are as ordinary to you as automobiles, desert streams, and ice in the tropics. At the same time, the whole world is enchanted, mysterious. Automobiles, desert streams, and ice are all as astonishing as angels.

To convey this, magical realist writers write the ordinary as miraculous and the miraculous as ordinary. The ice that gypsies bring to the tropical village of Macondo in One Hundred Years of Solitude is described with awe. How can such a substance exist? It is so awesomely beautiful that characters find it difficult to account for or describe. But it's not just novelties such as a first encounter with ice that merit such description. The natural world comes in for similar attention. The behavior of ants or the atmosphere of a streamside oasis are described in details that match objective experience, but which remind us that the world is surprising and seemingly full of design and purpose.

The miraculous, on the other hand, is described with a precision that fits it into the ordinariness of daily life. When one of the characters in One Hundred Years of Solitude is shot in the head, the blood from his body flows out into the street in a path that takes it all the way to the feet of the character's grandmother—a miracle. But along the way, the path of the blood is described in great detail, and the miraculous journey is rooted in the day-to-day activities of the village and the grandmother's household. An even better example is the character who is so beautiful that she is followed everywhere by a cloud of butterflies. This extraordinary trait is brought to earth somewhat by the observation that all of the butterflies have tattered wings. The miraculous, looked at closely, is mundane.

I've written this essay from memory, without consulting the novels to which I allude. I may have a detail or two wrong. My point remains valid: Magical realism is a distinctive form of fiction that aims to produce the experience of a non-objective world view. Its techniques are particular to that world view, and while they may at first look something like the techniques of sophisticated fantasy, magical realism is trying to do more than play with reality's rules. It is conveying realities that other people really do experience, or once experienced.

As a tool, magical realism can be used to explore the realities of characters or communities who are outside of the objective mainstream of our culture. It's not just South Americans, Indians, or African slaves who may offer these alternative views. Religious believers for whom the numinous is always present and miracles are right around the corner, believers to whom angels really do appear and to whom God reveals Himself directly, they too inhabit a magical realist reality.

While I don't expect the words "magical realism" to revert to their specialized use, I hope that writers won't lose sight of the special literature those words once pointed to exclusively. Magical realism is fascinating to read, and I hope to see more writers exploring its possibilities and conveying to "mainstream" readers ways of thinking that can help all of us to somewhat re-enchant the world.

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